

# High Top Ranch School P.O. Box 440029 Koosharem, Utah 84744

September 8, 2005





Utah State Office of Education 250 East 500 South P.O. Box 144200 Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4200

# THE REPORT OF THE VISITING TEAM REVIEWING

# **High Top Ranch School**

P.O. Box 440029 Koosharem, UT 84744

September 8, 2005

## UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

# DIVISION OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

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## **FOREWORD**

The major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate school growth and improvement so as to increase student achievement.

In these efforts, the school staff makes a comprehensive evaluation of the school's programs, operations, and results. The school determines how actual practices align to stated objectives and resulting outcomes. It is a three-phased evaluation: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, September 8, 2005, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to increase student achievement.

The entire staff of High Top Ranch School is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the visiting team. The excellent leadership given by Principal Dr. Ell Sorenson is also commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for their desire for excellence at High Top Ranch School, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more dramatically increase student achievement at High Top Ranch School.

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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# HIGH TOP RANCH SCHOOL

# ADMINISTRATION AND STAFF

Dr. Ell B. Sorenson ....... Owner/Educational Director

# **Faculty and Staff**

Dr. Milton Wayne Brindley:	Science
•	Elementary Teacher, Music
Michael Congdon	Vocational Ed, Technology, Art,
<u>-</u>	
Tad Draper	
Cassie Sorenson	Tutor Middle and Elementary School
Justin Sorenson	. Business Management, Tutor in Middle School, Wrestling
Kari Allen Sorenson	. Mathematics, Music, Earth Science, Computer Technician
La June Sorenson	Librarian Assistant
Lucinda Sorenson	Science, Culinary Arts, Tutor in Middle School
Milton Chad Sorenson	Vocational Ed, Math
Todd Sorenson	Tutor in Middle School
Wendy Sorenson	

## HIGH TOP RANCH SCHOOL

MOTTO: GUIDING YOUNG MINDS FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

Our mission is to accept students as they come to us, to guide them to change their behavior and to return them to their home environment as effective learners and lifelong contributing persons.

#### BELIEF STATEMENTS

Among our strongest beliefs about students are the following:

- All children are naturally good.
- All children can and will learn anything that is important to them.
- The rate at which children learn is directly related to their level of preparedness to learn something they do not know.
- When properly prepared, all children are fast learners.
- The successful teacher is a guide and fellow learner who is driven to ferret out things that are worth knowing and help their students learn why they are really important.
- There are many Truths that are absolute not relative. We would like it said of us "they only teach that which is important."
- We know there is a vast difference between information and truth. We are dedicated to identifying truths.
- We believe that space ship earth is abundantly stocked in all areas with enough for our whole trip. We refuse to be driven by a fear of scarcity.
- Music, math and poetry are examples of universal languages. Well-educated people are comfortable users of universal languages.
- Our school should be an extension of life. Hence, we try to use all available time for learning.

- Physical health is one of the strongest allies of effective learning. We are always engaged in promoting healthy practices.
- We seek after anything that is virtuous, lovely, and praiseworthy or of good report.
- Grading and reporting of progress should be individualized and scientific. We refuse to use artificial curves or to terminate learning by lowering the bar.

Note: These statements are tools by which we determine if our compass is pointing in the right direction.

## We believe the following about student learning:

- All students will learn that which is truly important to them in a reasonably honest fashion.
- While students learn in different ways and means, our best guess is that all students can learn almost anything.
- A student's emotional and behavioral state of mind has significant impact on learning.
- Students who are properly prepared to learn that which is next will be able to learn it well and reasonably fast.
- Student learning should be assessed through a variety of assessments.
- While many students have barriers that slow their learning and processing of new knowledge, most of these barriers can be overcome under the right circumstances.
- The teachers are at their best, as guides and fellow learners, when involved in the students' learning process.
- Students learn best when the teacher uses the following instructional interventions: reinforcement, vertical acceleration, reading readiness, mastery, cues and feedback.
- Students should be engaged in learning that which is truly important.
- It is possible and desirable to significantly increase the students engaged learning time without adding more hours to their schedules.

# MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Ralph P. Vander Heide, Ph.D., Consultant in School Accreditation, Visiting Team Chairperson

Judith H. Vander Heide, M.S., Consultant in School Accreditation

#### VISITING TEAM REPORT

## HIGH TOP RANCH SCHOOL

**CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE** 

In 1958 a group of young men started the first private boys' summer camp in Utah at Koosharem, Utah. Koos Kamp, as it was later called, became the window through which Sorensons' Ranch School and High Top Ranch School became realities. Sorensons' Ranch School emerged as a residential school and behavioral treatment center in 1986. High Top Ranch School was started in 1998. It was conceived of as a Special Purpose School and residential behavioral treatment center for younger students. The school has JCAHO (Joint Commission on the Accreditation of Health Care Organizations) accreditation, as well as provisional Special Purpose School accreditation with NAAS.

Today the school is totally owned by members of the Sorenson family who have lived in the valley since the 1800s.

Initially the population of students was in the middle school ages, with occasional students who were in high school. At present, the school population is made up mostly of students from ten to fourteen years of age. Occasionally special exceptions are made to accept younger students who will continue in the program and who will reach the abovementioned age bracket within a few months.

High Top provides educational/therapeutic services for some of the most difficult youngsters in the population. They have experienced failure in school and rejection by almost everyone responsible for them. They have great difficulty dealing with their peers and exhibit multiple issues that span the psychological and sociological spectrum. They range from being lost to being thrown away.

The owners have decided that High Top Ranch School should remain a small school in order to better give individualized attention to students. Some of the school's defining characteristics are its open-entry/open-exit format, individualized instruction, competency-based learning, outdoor education, personal tutoring, and flexible scheduling. The school also emphasizes the following:

- All students are enrolled in school from nine in the morning until five in the afternoon.
- All students are involved in an activities program from five in the evening until ten at night.
- Each student is enrolled in a BSA Program (Cub Scouts for boys under 11 years old and Boy Scouts for those who are over 11 years old).

- Each student is involved in individual and group therapy specially designed to meet his emerging needs.
- Most students stay at High Top for 9 to 12 months and then return to their homes and local schools, both private and public.
- All students spend many days working on the ranch and exploring in the mountains on each side of the valley.
- High Top Ranch School has sought and achieved the best accreditation for this RTC.
- Students come from almost every state in the United States.
- a) What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of its profile?

The school has made significant findings about each student, since each is carefully profiled in order to individualize instruction to the extent possible and to help students with their psychological and behavioral issues. The Visiting Team notes that High Top adequately portrays the school population, environment, curriculum, and other relevant information about the school, with emphasis on its mission, philosophy, and educational and rehabilitative direction for each student.

The school's analysis of the profile includes the identification of its strengths and limitations, and for the most part it provides a description of the "big picture" about the performance of the school. Profile information was used in drafting the school's improvement plan.

The Visiting Team notes that in preparing the profile the school followed the guidelines of the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) and the NSSE handbook, *School Improvement: Focusing on Student Performance*, as well as the Utah accreditation handbook, *Collaborating for Student Achievement*.

b) What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?

The Visiting Team commends the profile information that is given. The data given includes assessments (achievement, exit, observation, participation, and perception) and artifacts (external communications, materials, organizational documents and records). It also includes information on the type of disorders that are treated at the ranch, daily and weekly schedules, information on residential life, information on the "mastery" academic program, results of surveys, questions and answers about the school, and major improvements that have been made at the school during the past year. Then, too, the self-study contains many

colored photos, which help the reader clearly understand (i.e., visualize) the school, its environment, and its academic/therapeutic program.

The school is reminded to continue to put its best foot forward and to profile thoroughly.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS**

- a) To what extent has the school community engaged in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?
  - The faculty and staff at High Top Ranch School, along with some stakeholders, are part of the collaborative process.
- b) To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?

This has been described in Chapter 1 above.

# CHAPTER 3: INSTRUCTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

High Top's desired results for student learning (DRSLs) are as follows:

- The ability to read, write, and do math at their grade level in pursuit of the ability to be functioning at a 9<sup>th</sup> grade level.
- The ability to solve semi-structured problems by formulating and testing hypotheses.
- The ability to communicate effectively both orally and in writing.
- The ability to work productively in groups with persons from different backgrounds.
- Familiarity with how to operate a computer.

School staff members engaged in a collaborative procedure for determining the DRSLs. The staff and SIP team used the "Survey of Goals for Student Learning" published by the

National Study of School Evaluation, as well as observations of student achievement and educational research, to determine the learning needs of students.

The school listed many more DRSLs than the above, including, for example, the skills listed in the SCAN report. It was determined by the Visiting Team that all these skills are indeed taught; however, the objective of the self-study is to concentrate on a few DRSLs during a defined period of time. Therefore, the above five were chosen as being salient during the next year (or longer), and added to the list was emphasis on character education (social responsibility, respect for others, etc.).

In assessing and teaching the DRSLs, the self-study reports that a variety of methods are employed. Assessment includes not only paper-and-pencil tests, but also oral testing, observation, student assessment, portfolios, projects, journals, and exhibitions.

Instructional techniques and methodologies include vertical acceleration through the curriculum, mastery math, reinforcement, and cues and feedback.

# **Shared Vision, Beliefs, Mission, and Goals:**

a) To what extent did the school facilitate a collaborative process to build a shared vision for the school (mission) that defines a compelling purpose and direction for the school?

High Top Ranch School stakeholders work collaboratively to build a shared vision, which is driven by the owner/director (and teacher). Stakeholders met regularly as part of the self-study process. Beliefs, mission, and DRSLs were a result of the collaborative approach. The mission statement does indeed describe a compelling purpose and direction for the school.

Stakeholders appear to understand that they must work their way through problems of instructional practice at ever-increasing levels of complexity and demand.

b) To what extent has the school defined a set of beliefs that reflect the commitment of the administration and staff to support student achievement and success?

This has been well accomplished (see the list of beliefs at the beginning of this report). The school beliefs address key issues pertinent to effective decision-making and policy development. It appears that the implications of the school's belief statements and the level of the school's conviction to act upon the beliefs have been considered prior to finalizing the list of beliefs. The Visiting Team does caution that there are many beliefs, including a set for students (and all youth) in general, and a separate set that refer to learning, as well as a motto. In future self-studies, stakeholders should revisit the numerous beliefs (all of which are worthwhile) to determine whether some can be combined. The Visiting Team

also notes that stakeholders are mindful of the beliefs, and indeed guided by them in their work at High Top Ranch School.

c) To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's desired results for student learning (DRSLs)?

They align as recommended by NSSE. The Visiting Team observed that the analysis of students' learning needs takes into account the profile data and related assessment and evaluation measures of student learning. The expectations for student learning reflect meaningful and appropriately challenging goals. They are free of jargon, and all stakeholders can understand the clear and concise language. Again the Visiting Team points out that reduction and concentration on fewer DRSLs and beliefs would help to focus stakeholders on the most compelling strengths and limitations of the school.

High Top lists three major indicators of success in regard to the school's mission statement:

- Students will use acceptable behavior in their family and school.
- Students will be able to function at their grade level in their school when they return home.
- Students will recognize and avoid negative influences that impact on their learning and behavior.

## **Curriculum Development:**

a) To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards and the Utah Core Curriculum (with inclusion of the Utah Life Skills)?

The curriculum is based on the Utah Core Curriculum, and teachers work together to meet and modify the core as needed for the school's unique population. The Utah Life Skills are a part of the curriculum. Standards for appropriate learning for the varying abilities guide the development of curriculum.

b) To what extent does the teaching staff work collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's desired results for student learning?

See above. All faculty members concur in focusing on the school-wide DRSLs as part of their teaching assignment. The Visiting Team again points out the need for reduction and concentration with regard to the DRSLs.

# **Quality Instructional Design:**

a) To what extent does the professional staff design and implement a variety of learning experiences that actively engage students?

Teachers have learned that they must be creative and innovative with this student population in order to help with the rehabilitation of students as well as their academic needs. Teachers are very much aware that instructional time must be protected and appropriately allocated to support learning. The Visiting Team encourages the teaching staff to continue and to improve this endeavor.

b) To what extent do the professional staff and leadership provide additional opportunities which support student learning?

The students engage in several appropriate "additional opportunities," such as sports, equine therapy, work with farm animals (as well as doing farm work), and community service, as well as activities that directly support the curriculum. The school provides students with many opportunities that are an integral part of the program to improve and enrich their learning through expanded use of time, facilities, and instructional resources.

# **Quality Assessment Systems:**

a) To what extent has the staff developed classroom or school-wide assessments based on clearly articulated expectations for student achievement?

The development of assessments of student learning is based on a clear definition of the type of achievement to be assessed and the performance standards for evaluating the quality of students' achievement. Assessment is both formative and summative. It appeared to the Visiting Team that assessments are fair, equitable, creative, and varied. Teachers attempt to individualize assessment.

## **Leadership for School Improvement:**

a) To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning?

The principal is a competent and widely experienced educational leader who understands the importance of promoting and fostering "quality instruction" and fostering a nurturing environment for the boys at the school. He is a competent practitioner of "tough love."

He encourages decision-making that is data-driven, research-based, and individualized. He provides stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. He monitors the work of the teachers and checks on the progress of the students. He also teaches daily, spends many after school hours with the boys, and participates with them in the work of the working farm.

The school leadership promotes quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning.

# **Community Building:**

- a) To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within the school?
  - As noted throughout this report, community building is part of the ethos of High Top. Positive and productive working relationships are established among students, teachers, support staff, and administrators.
- b) To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?

As noted above, the school participates in community projects and service learning, which is an integral part of the program.

## **Culture of Continuous Improvement and Learning:**

- a) To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs focused on the school's goals for improvement?
  - Professional development is provided as needed and encouraged in areas of need.
- b) To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?
  - The school is committed to progressive change. Of course, a principle concern is to help these youngsters with their personal problems in order that they may better achieve academically

# CHAPTER 4: NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF ACCREDITED SCHOOLS (NAAS) STANDARDS I-XI

## Standard I – Educational Program

High Top Ranch School meets all four sections of this standard. The educational program is aligned with the mission statement and beliefs. The Visiting Team observed that the vision for the school has been collaboratively developed. The instructional and organizational practices, as well as the policies and procedures, support the desired results for student learning and prepare students to succeed in a culturally diverse, democratic society. The program of studies meets the requirements of the state.

## Standard II - Student Personnel Services

All three sections of this standard are met. Personnel services are designed to give appropriate, systematic assistance to students as called for in the subsections of the requirements. The assigned personnel for guidance includes a minimum of one full-time person for each 400 students enrolled. Of course, High Top Ranch School has only 15 students.

The primary objective of the counseling/therapy program is to promote and enhance the academic and personal development of students and to prepare them for post-high school experiences. Therapy helps them to understand impediments to academic achievement that have occurred in their lives due to their behavioral issues.

# Standard III – School Plant and Equipment

The ranch buildings and their lovely setting provide for a variety of instructional activities and programs and incorporate aesthetic features that contribute to a positive educational atmosphere. This provides for the health and safety of students and all school faculty members and personnel. At the present time, a new building is being constructed that will provide a gymnasium and additional classrooms. This standard is well met.

# Standard IV - Library Media Program

Because the school shares the library at the nearby Sorenson Ranch School, the five sections of this standard are met. The school library media program is a resource for literacy, information, and curriculum support. It contributes to the achievement of the DRSLs. A certified library media teacher advises and helps with library improvement. Sufficient funds are provided each year to meet the library/media needs of students and teachers. High Top is also building its own

library. Ongoing improvement of the library should be a concern of all stakeholders

## Standard V - Records

This standard is met. Student records are maintained, handled, and protected in the best interests of students and parents. Students and parents have the right to access personal student records and are ensured the privacy of such, as guaranteed by federal legislation.

# Standard VI – School Improvement (This is addressed in the self-study.)

The five sections of this standard are met. The school improvement plan focuses on the total school rather than each of the separate components within the school. Systematic analysis of data regarding the performance of students has been incorporated into the comprehensive school improvement process, as has ongoing examination of instructional practices and physical and equipment needs. The plan is updated and adjusted each year in alignment with perceived needs. The leadership is very much aware that improvement is a process, not an event, and urges the faculty to generate internal accountability.

# Standard VII – Preparation of Personnel

This standard is met. All professional personnel are in compliance with the licensing requirements of the state of Utah and are endorsed or properly temporarily exempted for the subjects, which they are teaching.

## Standard VIII - Administration

This standard is met. The administration of High Top Ranch School provides educational leadership, supervises and coordinates programs, and carries out the necessary and required administrative procedures.

# Standard IX - Teacher Load

This standard is met. The total number of students instructed by any one teacher in any one grading period does not exceed numbers set by the Utah State Office of Education and/or NAAS.

## Standard X – Activities

This standard is well met. As noted, the school supports activities that supplement and augment the basic instructional program by providing additional enriching experiences for students, consistent with the school's mission and beliefs. Attention is paid to providing equal opportunities. The activities are primarily

centered at this working farm, but field trips and other activities are engaged in as well. A most commendable activity is the emphasis on scouting.

## Standard XI – Business Practices

This standard is met. The school is financially responsible. Proper budgetary procedures and generally accepted accounting principles are followed for all school funds. The school's advertising and promotional literature appear to be completely truthful and ethical.

## **CHAPTER 5: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS – ACTION PLAN**

a) To what extent is the school-wide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up?

The plan appears to be adequate and understood by all stakeholders. There is school-wide commitment to the action plan, and follow-up procedures are sound. The Visiting Team assumes that the plan will achieve the desired outcomes. School personnel intend to change and modify it as needed. The school, however, did not follow the suggested format of NSSE.

The recommended format is to have complete alignment (profiling—establishing beliefs—mission statement derived from beliefs—analysis of how the school is operating—establishment of two or three DRSLs based on profiling, mission, and beliefs—an action plan that addresses the DRSLs).

High Top Ranch School's action plan covers more than the DRSLs and is not directly related to them for all objectives. Perhaps the school should simply create an action plan in addition to the present one, which will show exactly how the school-wide DRSLs are to be accomplished. The Visiting Team notes that a template exists in the self-study for achieving the DRSLs. Each teacher can use that template; however, the Visiting Team suggests that it be used for a school-wide plan as well. First, stakeholders should consider reducing the DRSLs to two or three manageable, school-wide learning outcomes, as outlined in the NSSE handbook.

The action plan addresses the following five goals, which are not exactly the same as the identified DRSLs (see Chapter 3):

- Improve coordination of individual student reading time.
- Improve the articulation of student achievement between High Top and the student's school of origin.

- Complete certification requirements for all teachers and special classroom personnel.
- Increase student achievement in scouting by coordinating efforts between the scoutmaster and the evening/weekend staff.
- Increase student achievement by implementing an entry/exit achievement testing program.

# CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM

# **Commendations:**

- The Visiting Team commends all constituents, but especially the principal, for preparation of the thorough self-study. Photos that in essence illustrate what is occurring at High Top Ranch School (indeed, they provide the "big picture") are a unique and helpful addition to the self-study.
- The Visiting Team commends all school personnel and students for their hospitality and cooperation with the Visiting Team.
- The Visiting Team commends all personnel for their honesty concerning the academic programs at High Top Ranch School, and for their willingness to improve.
- The Visiting Team commends all school personnel for their enthusiasm and apparent devotion to improving the lives of the boys (i.e., for their commitment to the mission statement and beliefs).
- The Visiting Team commends the school personnel for providing worthwhile, educational extracurricular activities and fostering a loving and nurturing but goal-directed atmosphere.
- The Visiting Team commends the owners of High Top Ranch for maintaining a beautiful environment that is most conducive to learning, including construction of the new, large building.
- The Visiting Team commends the administration for maintaining an emphasis on scouting (Boy Scouts of America).

## **Recommendations:**

- The Visiting Team recommends that all stakeholders revisit the DRSLs, decide upon two or three on which to concentrate, and develop action plans specific to those DRSLs. Perhaps some DRSLs can be combined. For example, "Character Education" could include social and personal responsibility, respect for others, working with persons of other ethnic groups, etc.
- The Visiting Team recommends that the High Top Ranch School profile in future self-studies offer even more information and data, including follow-up studies on boys who have completed their stay at High Top.
- The Visiting Team recommends that all stakeholders continue to expand the library with appropriate materials. The Visiting Team notes that the school's library will be expanded and housed in the new building, allowing High Top to become more independent of Sorensons' Ranch School.
- The Visiting Team recommends that commitment to professional development be specific to identified needs.

Lastly, the school is reminded that accreditation provides reasonable assurance about the quality of opportunities available to students who attend the school. A primary purpose of accreditation is to protect the public trust. Accreditation promotes voluntary self-regulation. It is a means of showing confidence in a school's performance (i.e., that both quantitative and qualitative standards have been established). An ultimate objective of the self-study and accreditation process should be that schools institutionalize the process of reflective inquiry and thereby become internally responsible for the maintenance of standards—even the creation of standards. The Visiting Team anticipates that High Top Ranch School will continue the process of self-evaluation and ongoing improvement.

The Visiting Team has worked with the school for several years, and been impressed and pleased at witnessing growth and improvement in both the program and the physical facilities.

Stakeholders at High Top Ranch School, under the direction of strong leadership, focus on sustaining and improving a quality school. They are committed to sharing, continuing to learn, and continuing to grow, and they are committed to "saving" boys who desperately need tough but nurturing care and guidance.